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OU alumna saves lives of Lao children

By *Jeff Samoray, OU Web Writer*

Although America ended its involvement in the Vietnam War in 1973, the people of Laos continue to deal with the conflict's aftermath, often with tragic consequences. American planes dropped more than two million tons of military explosives within the country's borders during the war. However, about 30 percent of the bombs did not explode, creating an ongoing hazard for the villagers who live there. Each year, there are more than 100 accidents involving unexploded ordinance (UXO) in Laos, with children making up the majority of the victims.

Fortunately, educators such as OU alumna Christy Hicks, CAS '97, are working with the Lao government to raise awareness of these dangers. In 2000, Hicks established the **Lao Teacher Development Project**, a program that helps teachers in rural communities develop activity-based lessons to educate Lao children about UXO. For at least one month each year, Hicks volunteers her time to participate in the program, which has saved hundreds of lives.

"Laos has the unfortunate distinction of being the most heavily bombed piece of real estate on Earth," said Hicks, an Honors College graduate with a B.A. in English. "Millions of anti-personnel bomblets were dropped on the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos during the Vietnam War. Because the bomblets are the size of a baseball and often painted in bright colors, children are the most frequent victims of UXO accidents. It's a huge problem, but I decided that I had to do something to try to reduce the number of accidents."

Hicks, a youth and county development agent for Michigan State University's Oakland County extension center, first visited Laos in 1999 as a videographer for a University of California-Davis research team documenting Lao weaving techniques.

"I wasn't really aware of the problem when I first went to Laos," she said. "Our team traveled to some remote villages that are close to Vietnam where the heavy bombing occurred. We visited some schools and in a second grade classroom the teacher was going over bomb safety lessons using hand-drawn pictures. The kids spent about 25 percent of their day learning by rote not to get blown up. In an American school, the kids would be spending that time reciting their multiplication tables. That really brought the problem home to me."

When the Lao Ministry of Education expressed an interest in creating an unexploded ordinance safety curriculum to be taught in the primary schools, Hicks contributed some ideas for activity-based lessons related to their core curriculum, which evolved into the teacher development project. The lessons are short in duration, simple, require few materials and use the experiential learning process (do, reflect, apply) in multiple subject areas and classroom contexts.

"Once the curriculum was implemented, the teachers noticed that the activities – games, stories, songs, puppet shows – seemed to be beneficial to student achievement," Hicks said. "I was asked to provide a teacher training workshop in experiential learning, so that teachers could build skills in infusing activity-based learning across the curriculum."

Each January, the teacher development project brings 60 to 100 primary school teachers from across rural Laos for five-day workshops led by a team of educators from Thailand and the United States. The project is funded by **UNICEF, World Education Services** and individual contributions.

Though UXO accidents continue to occur, many children have avoided injury as a result of the program. One such child is Tuly Vang, an 8-year-old boy who is the only survivor of a bomblet that killed four boys. Hicks met him during a rural hospital last January.

"I was at the hospital meeting with families of UXO victims. Most of them experienced accidents before the UXO curriculum was being taught in schools. They all told me that the accident happened because they didn't know what a bomblet looked like," Hicks said. "Tuly Vang's story was different. He was near another boy who deliberately struck a

bomblet with a stick. When I asked Tuly Vang if he knew what the bomblet was, he said he did because he learned about UXO in school. He said he told his friend the bomblet was dangerous and he shouldn't touch it. Although Tuly Vang couldn't run fast enough to avoid all of the flying shrapnel when the bomblet exploded, his response probably saved his life.

"Knowing that the message is making an impact, and that children are learning how to avoid UXO accidents, makes it all worthwhile."

Hicks was recognized for her work earlier this year when she was named a finalist in the **Volvo for Life Awards**, which honors people who go above and beyond the call of duty to act with conscience, care and character to help others in need.

"I feel I have some responsibility to help," Hicks said. "As an American, I feel we sometimes don't know how spoiled we are. We don't have to deal with the remnants of war on our own soil. For most people, that's something in the history books. I obviously can't save the lives of all the kids, but it feels good to know that because of some action I took, at least one kid knew what to do when he saw a bomblet.

"I've been to Laos five times so far and plan to continue working there for as long as I'm able to do something useful that benefits Lao children. Laos has become a second home to me because my work there extends for at least a month every year. There are physical discomforts, like cold showers in the mountains, squat toilets and long journeys on unpaved roads. The Lao people quickly make me forget about those details, though. Their hospitality is incredible."

Hicks created a photography exhibit telling the stories of the families of young UXO accident victims that she hopes to make available to the public this fall.

For more information on the program's collaborative teacher development workshops and its impact on UXO, visit the **Lao Teacher Development Project** Web site.

SUMMARY

Each year, there are more than 100 accidents involving unexploded bombs in Laos, with children making up the majority of the victims. Fortunately, educators such as OU alumna Christy Hicks, CAS '97, are working with the Lao government to raise awareness of these dangers. In 2000, Hicks established the Lao Teacher Development Project, a program that helps teachers in rural communities develop activity-based lessons to educate Lao children. For at least one month each year, Hicks volunteers her time to participate in the program, which has saved hundreds of lives.

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